

The Olympic Games: *Imagining a New Media Legacy*

Funding through the British Academy Small Grants scheme has helped Professor Andy Miah and Dr Beatriz Garcia to pursue their research into the 'non-accredited' media at the Olympic Games. Here they describe the role of this alternative media coverage, and explain its significance for Britain on the approach to London 2012.

The Olympic Games have long been the world's largest peacetime event. Its audiences reach up to 4.7 billion viewers, with over 1.5 billion people watching the Opening Ceremony alone. The number of countries that participate within the Games exceeds that of the United Nations, and the investment by some of the world's largest transnational organisations and media companies has created a media spectacle that many other mega-events have emulated.

In 1999, we began researching the Olympic Movement. We first participated as delegates at the International Olympic Academy, as well as in programmes organised by our own National Olympic Committee. In the UK, the educational work of the Olympic Movement is overseen by the British Olympic Foundation in the UK, while the Centre for Olympic Studies in Barcelona has been leading research in this area for 20 years. From these experiences, it became apparent that studying the Olympic Games required a critical interrogation of its mission, which extends well beyond the sports competitions.

Olympic ideals

The Olympic Movement is unlike most other sports organisations in that it holds itself up to high social aspirations. It is underpinned by a Charter, which sets out the range of its ideological commitments: such references to protecting 'human dignity', respect, fair play, non-discrimination and inclusion are made explicit, and align it with the work of a range of international non-governmental organisations. To this end, the modern Olympic Movement has been as much about global cultural and political collaboration, as it has been about the competitions themselves. In the original vision of the founder of the modern Olympic Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the sports were the mechanism through which a range of social issues could be addressed, particularly inspiring youth, and building social cohesion and mutual understanding across cultures.

Over the last 116 years, these aspirations for the Games have been challenged politically and financially. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) rescued itself from financial ruin in the 1980s through the negotiation of broadcast revenue rights and its worldwide sponsorship programme. However, this salvation has also become part of what makes the Olympics so controversial: many advocates of the Olympic Movement feel that the over-commercialisation has led to the

devaluing of the Olympic ideals. The tangible elements of these concerns involve the privileged position sponsors enjoy in receiving tickets to sports and ceremonies during the Games, or being able to select a high proportion of people to act as torchbearers, without any expectation of public accountability. Each Olympic Games involves a negotiation of these power relationships between private sponsors and the public good.



Figure 1. *The first Coca-Cola torchbearer at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics.* Photo: © VANOC/COVAN.

Research

In this context, our research has focused on examining the cultural, media and political aspects of the Games. Sometimes, there is an explicit interaction between these dimensions and the sports events. At the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, the IOC was able to negotiate a situation where athletes from North and South Korea – two countries still technically at war – were able to enter the Opening Ceremony hand in hand, under one common flag. Many other examples like this provide a glimpse of the complex and rich historical tapestry that constitutes the Olympic Games. As the IOC negotiates the difficult



Figure 2. 'Olympic Tent Village': a staged occupation of a vacant lot in Down Town East Side, Vancouver, during the Olympic Games, 18 February 2010. Photo: Andy Miah.

path of undertaking geopolitical collaboration while aspiring to be an apolitical organisation, each Olympic Games becomes a focal point for highlighting the critical political concerns of a nation, region or city.

Our research has taken us to each Winter and Summer Olympic Games city since Sydney 2000, at which we have worked as embedded researchers within operational media centres. This field work has involved spending time investigating what happens outside the sports venues, such as the China cultural village in the Beijing 2008 Olympic park – a space tucked at the back of the park, which was probably missed by most Olympic visitors. The documenting of these spaces, along with other Olympic-related activity that operates at the periphery of the programmed competition events, has dominated our approach.

With funding from the British Academy, one area we have prioritised is studying how alternative and new media communities operate around an Olympic Games. The majority of research into the role of Olympic media has focused on representational issues – such as how men and women are reported differently by commentators – or commercial aspects – such as rights holder issues, particularly for broadcasters. We wanted to focus on how the community of reporters interfaces with the cultural dimensions of the Olympic programme, with a view to assessing how these elements of the Games may gain wider recognition and how the full story of an Olympic Games is told. Typically, the accredited media do not have space, resources or time to discover these aspects. For example, how many people in the UK will have heard about the protests in Vancouver on Opening Ceremony day? What about the Olympic Tent Village, a space where Vancouver's homeless population located themselves in order to draw attention to how much homelessness had grown over the Olympic period (Figure 2)?

Non-accredited media

At the Olympic Games, most media representatives are managed via an official accreditation system controlled by the IOC and Organising Committee. Only these 'accredited journalists' have access to the

official sporting venues. Yet, since the Barcelona 1992 Games, an increasing number of non-accredited media have also emerged. And, by Sydney 2000, a substantial investment into media centres for these reporters had begun, out of the desire by the host city and regional stakeholders to promote their local assets, including their wider cultural offerings. In previously funded British Academy research at the Athens 2004 Olympic Games, we identified that the non-accredited media facilities and provision had become a central part of the Olympic delivery mechanism – particularly interesting because it operates in an ambiguously defined space within the organisational structure of an Olympics. Our work has further investigated the rise of the non-accredited media at the Olympic Games, by undertaking primary data collection at the Torino 2006 Olympic Winter Games and pre-Olympic Beijing during 2006.

These media centres are run by local stakeholders (often host city authorities, tourism and business consortiums and culture agencies), rather than the Olympic Organising Committee. They become the mouthpiece for the domestic government during the Games, while also providing stories often unrelated to the sports that dominate the main media facilities. For example, in Torino 2006, press conferences and presentations were held about the design behind the Olympic torch, in this case designed by Ferrari. At the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, the opening of Beijing Airport's Terminal 5, designed by Norman Foster, was one such event that eluded the attention of the accredited media, but which attracted those journalists who wanted to know more about the architectural projects that surrounded the Games.

Our research has shown that the staging of experiences for the non-accredited media is the primary mechanism for an Olympic host city to market itself during Olympic Games time. It is also the primary route towards telling and publicising cultural stories. In the lead up to London 2012, this will involve stories about the wealth of cultural activity that is taking place around the UK within the Nations and Regions, which will form the bulk of the Cultural Olympiad

programme. These places, located away from the city of London, will require space to showcase work during the Games, or they are likely to receive no national and international coverage. No such opportunities exist within the main accredited media centres, where only the highest profile non-sports stories gain space, such as the Opening Ceremony.

Citizen reporters

Despite the expansion of Olympic media centres – both accredited and non-accredited – they still do not capture the entire journalist population which is now reporting the Games. Since Torino 2006, a growing number of *citizen reporters* have become part of the Olympic coverage story. Their rise is evident in the most recent Olympic Games, which took place last month in Vancouver. Here, six media centres were in operation, and the number of unaccredited media will have easily matched the number of accredited. The channels through which these independent media operate are varied. Some are freelance bloggers with their own websites, others are part of larger organisations. However, in all cases, the new media communities are part of very well resourced, incredibly entrepreneurial networks, whose activities now intertwine with the communication structures of Olympic stakeholders. Critical mechanisms of such relationships are social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or YouTube, where there is a much greater opportunity to have direct communication with large organisations like the IOC than has been the case in the past. In response, the IOC is now even on Twitter, Flickr, Facebook and YouTube, perhaps signalling a shift in how it works with the media.

This diverse media population naturally gives rise to a range of political views, from overtly anti-Olympic campaigns, to celebrations of the Olympic Movement, or those who utilise the Olympic platform to promote their own unrelated campaigns. The IOC expressly prohibits accredited persons – athletes, officials etc. – from engaging in such activity during Games time, and the accredited media are also highly focused on the sports competitions and under contract to celebrate the Olympic values, rather than criticise them. This is why new journalist populations at the Olympics are so crucial, as these reporters will cover non-competition related human-interest narratives and scrutinise whether cities are meeting their public obligations during Games time. Yet the twist is that, as the interest in these stories grows, the accredited media are becoming increasingly interested in reporting them too, and now there is growing collaboration between the Organising Committee, its media partners and the citizen reporters. For example, in Beijing for the 2008 Olympic Games, the BBC made use of four independent street bloggers to write and podcast for their site.

Implications for 2012 and beyond

What we conclude about what happened at an Olympic Games derives largely from the stories filed by the mass of journalists – press and broadcasters – who attend the Games and spew forth accounts of what occurs on and off the competition ground. Who those journalists are, what they do, and how they are channelled through the Olympic world each have implications for what is represented and what the billions of Olympic audiences around the globe view and read. As such, the issue of defining who is a journalist, what rights they have, and how they are managed is crucial, since these will determine what we find out about an event. Yet, the concept of ‘the journalist’ has

changed and, with it, the management tasks of the Olympic Games and its host cities. Nevertheless, our newly expanded concept of the journalist has resulted in more than just increased demand for media guidance, information and facilities. It has also changed who is in control. At the Vancouver Games, people on public transport were reading Twitter on their mobile devices to find out the latest score of the Canada ice hockey games. They weren’t watching television or visiting the Organising Committee website: fans live in the venues were telling them what was happening.

The word legacy is often used to describe how the Olympic Games will have a long-term value for the nation and particularly those communities that are most affected. Yet, the term legacy should not be limited to the official Olympic stakeholders. London 2012 is an opportunity to think about what would be a valuable *media legacy* for the host nation at large. The focal point for these discussions is about how the rise of new media will interface with traditional media organisations, not as a means towards the former’s appropriation, but as a mechanism towards redistributing media power and building a more critical media community within our society.



Figure 3. These iconic red mittens were the hot item at the Vancouver 2010 Olympics. They received targeted marketing, and sales contributed to elite sport development in Canada. Photo: © VANOC/COVAN.

Professor Miah and Dr Garcia are completing a book on the Olympic Games for the Taylor and Francis book series ‘The Basics’. Their work can be found at www.culturalolympics.org.uk, an online educational series, which has been providing educational resources for 10 years. In February 2010, they brought a team of 10 researchers and writers to the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games working within media and cultural centres around the city, along with a Vancouver 2010 and London 2012 partnership around Cultural Olympiad content from England’s Northwest programme for 2012.

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